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ABSTRACT

This paper examines global approaches to culturally and developmentally appropriate early childhood education, focusing on Kindezi, an Africentric perspective. The paper describes Kindezi as the art of touching, caring for, and protecting children's lives and their environment, based on the Kindezian philosophy that children are a gift of God and thus are highly valued. Other important characteristics of the philosophy are the lack of separations between reality and spirituality, the responsibility of the community to raise children, the expectation that adults will provide for the community's older members, and the responsibility of the elders to transmit the culture. The "ndezi" is defined as one who practices the art of Kindezi in separation from the productive workforce, thereby affording women and men the opportunity to work. The Kindezian early childhood curriculum is described as predating Western curriculum development and as providing the rudimentary theoretical basis for major theorists such as Piaget, Montessori, and Vygotsky. The "sadulu" is described as the practical place of learning for children 2 years and older through activities such as field trips, nature walks, biological experiments, handicrafts, play, and listening to stories and songs of the "ndezi." It is noted that many traditional games and toys of African peoples support young children's cognitive and socioemotional development. The primary difference between the Kindezian curriculum and that of the West is described as the value given to oral literacy versus the elevation of written literacy. However, many aspects of early Western literacy learning can be compared to African language development. The Kindezian curriculum also supports children's development of emotional intelligences. (KB)

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Kindezi: A Distinctively Africentric Perspective on Early Childhood Education

The impetus for this paper is to contribute to and advance the research on viable global approaches to culturally and developmentally appropriate early childhood education. According to Bredekamp, (1987) in Developmentally Appropriate Practice in Early Childhood Programs Serving Children From Birth to Age 8, "The concept of developmentally appropriateness has two dimensions: age appropriateness and individual appropriateness. Although the content of the curriculum is determined by many factors such as tradition, ...social or cultural values, and parent desires, for the content and teaching strategies to be developmentally appropriate they must be age appropriate and individually appropriate".

According to their social and cultural values, each child in each cultural context must be valued on the basis of where they come from, where they hope to go, and the process by which they reach their destination. In order to accommodate these diverse cultural challenges, we as educators must take our own personal journeys to uncover who we are, where we are, and how we arrived here. Then we need to do our homework and prepare ourselves for the greatest challenge of the century which is

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to genuinely educate all children. One way to accomplish this is to examine, conceptualize and employ the philosophy of Kindezi.

Kindezian philosophy expresses the sentiment of many African peoples including the Bantu people of Kongo, Africa,and rests on the idea that children are highly valued; they are a 'gift of God'. Bantu means human beings, cultured people, or beings who embody values associated with good behavior and civility. (Gethaiga, 1998, p.117)

According to Bunseki Fu-Fiau and Lukondo-Wambo (1988)

> Kindezi, ... is basically the art of touching, caring for, and protecting the child's life and the environment in which the child's multidimensional development takes place. The word "Kindezi", a kikongo language term..... means to enjoy taking and giving special care. Baby-sitting is an experience required of all members in the African world, no matter what their physical state may be. Understanding the process of child development is one of the basic and most important principles in the understanding of the value and respect of life. (p.1-2)

Kindezi, as a philosophy, affords children the possibility to develop and grow into their full potential; to fulfill their God-given destiny. In a Kindezian model, children learn through modeling, intentionality, and

nurturing. Children's knowing, cosmologically, is derived from being at one with their world view.

Children are valued thus they value. Within a Kindezian framework, reality and spirituality are, metaphysically, one and the same. There are no separations between body and soul, science and nature, the sacred and the academic. The communal art of Kindezi dissolves artificial "ism" boundaries, engaging children in life and learning at optimal levels.

One of the main tenets of the philosophy is the responsibility of the community to see that children are raised appropriately, thus, it is expected that as they grow into adulthood they will provide for the older members of the community.

> The basic understanding that childhood is the foundation which determines the quality of a society is the main reason that prompted African communities to make Kindezi an art....to be learned by all their members. Thus, Kindezi is required in societies that want to prepare their members to become not only good fathers and mothers, but, above all, people who care about life and who understand, both humanely and spiritually, the highly unshakable value of the human being that we all are. Bunseki Fu Fiau and Lukokondo-Wambo (1998, p.4-5)

Children perpetuate the family; elders transmit the culture and abandonment of one or the other is anathema to the collective ideology.

Families are the center of the universe, and mothers who generally are the center of the family, play a major role in developing, nurturing, and enabling young children. The reality of physically liberating women is paramount in understanding the role Kindezi plays in Bantu societies in Africa.

When one practices the art of Kindezi one is an ndezi. Though the young ndezi and the old ndezi are separated from the productive workforce, their responsibilities and contributions to the community are interwoven into the cultural fabric of the society as in the weaving of fine kinte cloth. By providing for the young, the ndezi afford the women the opportunity to meet many challenges: to work the fields, to serve in the military and, with the men, to assure the security of the family and the community. Ndezi are the moral and spiritual weavers who provide the youngest children role models for cultural transmission and replication. The community is governed by all and elders are valued,

respected, and honored. Politically, socially, and economically Kindezi provides society with a glimpse of communal living whose attributes benefit all.

The Curriculum

Kindezian curriculum pervades the continent of Africa and predates Western attempts at curriculum development, including the highly touted Reggio Emilia system of education in northern Italy, and Froebel's German children's garden (kindergarten) by hundreds of years. The rationale for theories and practices attributed to major 18th, 19th and 20th century shapers of child development such as Pestalozzi, Montessori, Locke, Rousseau, Dewey, Piaget and Vygotsky is derived directly from ancient Africa where education was and is wholistic, practical, concrete, natural, experiential, social, inquiry-based, authentic, and spiritual.Though no credit has been given to Africa as the birthplace of the rudiments of present day early childhood education, the freedom to move and to learn, to engage and to express in naturalistic, child-centered, and mentor facilitated environments, reflected in European and African philosophies, evolved from childrearing affirming patterns of life modeled by Kindezi.

Editors Carolyn Edwards, Lella Gandini and George Forman, with reference to Reggio Emilio, in The Hundred Languages of Children (1998) propound, "Nowhere in the world is there such a seamless and symbiotic relationship between a school's progressive philosophy and its practices". (p.xvi) Perhaps this is true if "school" is construed as centers and school areas rather than the Kindezian sadulu (practical place of learning) which encompasses the world of the child, unconstrained by physical walls. And though the editors discuss what they call "schoolhouses without walls" that have allowed them to observe various educational practices globally, there is no mention of the accomplishments of the vast continent of Africa. But in order to get a proper feel for developmental practice one must investigate it within the continent of Africa, the source of traditions of childrearing that date to antiquity.

The sadulu, (practical place of learning), provides practical and oral teaching for children two years of age and older where field trips, nature walks, and biological experiments encourage and expand language development. Children make handicrafts, run,

play healer/doctor and more. They learn the nuances and social and cultural codes of their community, such as the signals parents/ndezi give them both verbally and nonverbally. The ndezi tells stories and sings songs of substance that encourage sharing and a sense of community, political responsibilities, and praise of the women of the community. Moral teaching places a high value on togetherness, the spiritual nature of life and respect for we-ness and is directly transmitted to the child by the old ndezi.

Play is an important part of a child's life. A common saying in the West is that play is the work of children. This is also the belief of the Bambara in Mali. Children's play is extremely important among the Bambara. During the early childhood period, the kinds of games and toys available to children are supportive of their cognitive and socioemotional development. In Zambia, the games that children engage in include hide-and-seek, ball games and singing and dancing. Many traditional games, tales, and riddles which necessitate recalling, memorizing, sequencing and logical thinking promote and develop

cognitive development and intellectual capacity. (Dembele & Poulton 1993, p.11)

In ancient Africa (other than in Egypt), a primary difference in curriculum components was the value of oral literacy versus the elevation of written literacy in other parts of the world. In more recent years, when proven necessary this has been easily redressed through inclusion of print and print related skills and masteries into the existing curriculum.

Dewey's learning by doing-project approach, Skinner's direct transmission of information-behavior modification approach, Piaget's prepared environment- constructivist approach and Vygotsky's zone of proximal development-social contextual approach find their impetus on the continent of Africa where in ancient Kemet (Egypt) all major disciplines were developed. This ancient civilization viewed education as the structuring of an environment to educe (bring out) the higher potential of that person through experimentation.. In naturalistic environments, children were led from simple to complex concepts where nature was complemented with nurture and were led through culturally based higher order thinking processes e.g. how to categorize and classify, prepare, and

use flora, fauna, and herbs for medicinal and other purposes and how to trace the path and pattern of the stars to indicate natural phenomenon.

Many aspects of early literacy learning in the West can be compared to language development in Africa. These can be subsumed in three superordinate categories as cited by Metsala (1996): "literacy as a source of entertainment-storytelling" e.g. ndezi use storytelling as a prominent means of transmitting cultural mores, "literacy as a set of skills to be deliberately cultivated-singing" e.g ndezi model skills of cultural survival, and "literacy as an integral part of everyday life-mealtime conversation" e.g. ndezi support the young child's development consistently through the oral tradition (p. 71).

In many African countries and in the United States, "language development is promoted through the use of language with children. Adults talk to children from the moment they are born. As the child grows older (ages 3-6), there is a conscious teaching of language skills through story telling, proverb-telling, questioning and songs". (Chibuye et al. 1986, 84)

In discussing learning domains in curriculum one must naturally include the affective domain. Current research in this area by Daniel Goleman in Emotional Intelligence (1995) summarized seven key emotional intelligences needed by children as:

> 1. Confidence. A sense of control and master of one's body, behavior, and world....
> 2. Curiosity. The sense that finding out about things is positive and leads to pleasure.
> 3. Intentionality. The wish and capacity to have an impact, and to act upon that with persistence....
> 4. Self-control. The ability to modulate and control one's own actions in age-appropriate ways....
> 5. Relatedness. The ability to engage with others based on the sense of being understood by and understanding others.
> 6. Capacity to communicate. The wish and ability to verbally exchange ideas, feelings, and concepts with others. This is related to a sense of trust in others and of pleasure in engaging with others, including adults.
> 7. Cooperativeness. The ability to balance one's own needs with those of others in group activity.
>
> A child who cannot focus his attention, who is suspicious rather than trusting, who is angry rather than optimistic destructive rather than respectful and one who is overcome with anxiety, preoccupied with frightening fantasy and who feels generally unhappy about himself, such a child has little opportunity at all, let alone equal opportunity, to claim the possibilities of the world as his own". (pgs. 194, 196)

Kindezian philosophy has always provided children with the seven key emotional intelligences Goleman states are needed for this crucial capacity. Its' matrilineal-reciprocal respect for gender expresses the concept of collective and cooperative learning at its highest level. Sociologically, politically, and economically children are inculcated into the means of knowing and being that purposefully challenges them to be thoroughly humane while building on and respecting their heritage. Everything and everyone are parts of a viable, productive whole and thus valued an such.

This brief overview of the Kindezian philosophy of early childhood education represents an historical developmentally appropriate Afrocentric worldview that provides a framework and a forum on which to globally begin to respond to the 21st century education of African children and the descendants of the African disapora.

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